

Proper 7C 2019 Sermon

Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" -- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

I was not raised in a liturgical church. Growing up, I had no familiarity with the liturgical Seasons of the Church Year. My first year in an Episcopal seminary, I experienced Lent for the first time. I was told by many of my seminary classmates that they intended to fast for 24 hours on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Now, I had never *intentionally* fasted in my life, and the thought of going for a whole day without food was somewhat frightening! But I did it, and it made me feel like I had somehow accomplished something. Then, as many of you know, one thing led to another, and I began to restrict my eating on days **other** than Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Before long, I was in a full-blown state of *anorexia nervosa*. At my lowest point, I weighed 93 pounds. My family saw

me wasting away and told me, “All you have to do is eat!” But I was **possessed** by this crazy but overpowering idea that I *must not* gain weight; while at the same time, all I could think of, 24/7, was food.

If I had lived in Jesus’ day, without any knowledge of modern science or psychology, I would have been convinced I had a demon – for I felt *possessed*. The worst part was that I had linked my **identity** with being super thin. I didn’t *have* anorexia; I **WAS** an anorexic. And I was afraid of not having **any** identity at all if I were to gain weight and no longer **be** an anorexic.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus asks a man possessed by demons, “What is your name?” And he replies, “Legion” – because he is possessed by so *many* demons. He can’t tell Jesus his true name, for he has *lost* his identity as a whole human being, and is now defined – and named – by what possesses him. David Lose writes, “He has been completely defined by what assails him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him bound, by all those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance.

“And here’s the thing: I think that a lot of **us** aren’t all that different.”¹ (unquote)

My friends, I believe Dr. Lose is right! You and I can all too easily fall into the trap of defining *ourselves* in terms of those things which are *not* our **true** identity in God. Perhaps as a child we were told by our classmates that we were a loser, or ugly, or clumsy, or fat, or stupid, or whatever, and we came to identify with those labels. We came to define ourselves by our deficiencies and setbacks, our disappointments and failures. Now, if we think of ourself as a failure or as incapable of making it in the world, it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I firmly believe that one reason that some physically able people apply for disability is *not* that they are lazy, but rather that they are possessed by a legion of demons telling them, “You’re no good. You’re not *capable* of making it in this world.” My friends, I’ve met **many** of these people. And when we “hardworking” folk look down our noses at them, we only strengthen their identity as “worthless” or “incapable.” As Christians, we should try to strengthen their **true** identity in Christ, their true Self, in all its beauty and potential – knowing, all the while, that **any** “identity change” is difficult and takes love, compassion, and time. And that is what we commit to when we pledge in our baptismal vows to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself.” (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305)

There are *other* possible situations which some of us experience in our formative years that can cause us to form an identity which is **NOT** who we were created by God to be, **NOT** our True Self. Rather than being labelled by our childhood peers as a loser, perhaps we were chronically **sick** in the early stages of our life, and we came to *identify* with that sickness. It took me ‘til I was in college to get over seeing myself as a sickly asthmatic, and to realize that I *could* be strong and independent. It was **not** an *easy* identity-change.

Or perhaps someone *hurt* us at some point in our life, and we came to think of ourself as “the mistreated one” or “the victim.” This identity, too, can possess us. We **can’t** let go of the wrong, can’t forgive, for we then would lose our identity as “victim” or “the person who was wronged.” This can also happen on a group level. How many candidates for political office tell groups of people, “You have been wronged, and I can make it right again” - **not** necessarily because the politician genuinely cares, but because he or she knows how to exploit the powerful “victim identity” of certain voters.

Or perhaps we were raised in an environment in which we were taught that we, individually or as a group, were *superior* to others. Such a “superiority complex” can *also* be a form of possession, for **that** is not who we are in God, either.

The Bible tells us that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and that unique image and likeness which *each* of us is – our **True** identity in God – does not include the words “loser,” “incapable,” “victim,” “sickly one,” or “superior one.”

How *important* is it that we come to live out of our **true** identity in God rather than identifying with our inadequacies, sicknesses, sense of superiority, or the hurts that have been inflicted on us? Consider this: today’s Gospel passage is the **only** time in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus *purposefully* travels to Gentile territory. He tells his disciples to get in the boat, and they cross the Sea of Galilee. Once there, Jesus heals this man who has lost his true identity, his humanity, restoring the man to “his right mind” and to his community; then Jesus gets back in the boat and returns across the sea to Jewish territory.

We are left with the understanding that Jesus made this long trip for one purpose: to visit a man who had lost his identity and restore him to his true self. *That* is how important it is that we allow the demons that have robbed us of our true identity in God to leave. Sometimes this may involve the intervention of some healer – medical, psychological, or spiritual; sometimes the demons are simply crowded out as we – through love or prayer or meditation – are filled with the Holy Spirit and our True identity in Christ emerges. Episcopal author Agnes Sanford once said that there are two ways to get a cockroach out of an empty bottle: you can turn the bottle upside down and shake it until the cockroach comes out; or you can fill the bottle with water, and the cockroach will float out. Such is the “divine therapy” of certain spiritual practices like Centering Prayer.

Now there is another detail in today’s Gospel that we should not overlook, and that is the townspeople’s *response* to the man’s healing. Luke writes: “when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. *And they were afraid...* Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were *seized with great fear.*” (Luke 8:35, 37) Why are the townsfolk not

thrilled that the man was healed? Why are they “seized with great fear?” Because Jesus has upset the community dynamics, the community system. For in that community, this man fills a role: the role of scapegoat.

“The demonically possessed man represents the city,” writes Fr. John Shea. “He is the symptom-bearer of what the entire population is experiencing... He becomes the scapegoat, exhibiting in **his** tortured mind and body what lurks in all. When all the destructiveness is focused in one, the rest can go about leading as normal a life as possible... **One** man, naked and living among the dead, may be acting out the destructiveness, but the entire city is possessed.”² Richard Rohr writes: “Hating, fearing or diminishing someone else holds us together, for some reason. The creating of necessary victims is in our hard wiring. [The philosopher of Social Science] Rene Girard calls ‘the scapegoat mechanism’ the central pattern for the creation and maintenance of cultures worldwide since the beginning. [It] is the best possible disguise for evil. We can concentrate on the evil ‘over there’ and avoid our own [demons]. Evil is never easily recognized **as** evil by those who do it; or as Paul so wisely says, ‘Satan disguises himself as an angel of light’ (2 Cor. 11:14).”³ The name “Lucifer,” after all, means “light-bearer.”

So it is that the healing of this one man is like removing a large brick from the bottom of a chimney: the whole structure becomes unstable. The townsfolk see the source of this instability as Jesus, so they beg him to leave. No one likes change in a stable system, even if that system is unhealthy. We like things the way they are, even at the expense of creating scapegoats. We often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not know. Just as my anorexic self was afraid of what would heal me (food), and my asthmatic self was afraid of losing my identity as “weak and incapable,” so are these townspeople afraid that if this one man is healed, they will have no scapegoat on which to project their individual and collective demons.

Jesus gets back into the boat to leave, and the restored man *begs* to come with him. But Jesus sends him back. The man has been freed from his legion of demons, and Jesus sends him back to his own people to restore **them** to *their* right minds, also.

And he sends us to do the same thing – to come to our own True Self, our own “right mind,” and then to restore others to *their* “right minds,” also. For you and I are not the only ones who strongly identify with that which is **not** our true identity in God! So many people in our world do not know that they are beloved children of an infinitely loving God, so they seek their identities in other places. They wear a certain type of clothes, find a unique tattoo, find their identity in their nation, their ethnic group, their gang, their religion, their political party, the branch of the military in which they served, their candidate, their sports team, their car or motorcycle, this or that product which the advertisements tell us will make us cool or strong or look younger. They identify with their failures, their

sickness, their disabilities, their hurts and grudges, their victimhood, or their superiority. Or perhaps they find their identity by being **opposed** to some other person or group: the *other* political party or candidate, Muslims, immigrants, blacks, gays, lesbians and transgendered, the homeless, ex-cons – you can fill in the rest of the list easily enough. Finding our identity in being *against* these “others,” or being “superior” to them, is a form of possession, for it keeps us from living into our **true** identity in God. And my friends, I have come to believe that identifying with the **wrong** thing – both on the individual and group level – may well be the greatest problem we face in our world today.

And so, like he does for the man in our Gospel, Jesus calls us back to our right mind, our True Self; and then he sends us out. He sends us out to ask people the question: “What is your name?” – and then to assure them that their true identity lies in the heart of an infinitely loving God, in whose image they were created. But *first* we must know it to be true for ourself.

AMEN

1 David Lose, “Legion,” Sunday, June 16, 2013

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2609>

2 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 173

3 Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden*, Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008, pp. 134, 135